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ABSTRACT

This paper offers the personal reactions of a high school student and his parents to 27 preapplication college campus visits conducted from June through August 1994. The institutions included three public, six private religious, and 18 private nonsectarian institutions. Data were obtained through observations and interviews, and the study reports the reactions of the student and his parents. The report notes that requested information about campus tours and information sessions were generally received prior to the scheduled visit; that maps and signs made locating the admissions office easy; and that the admissions offices generally had brochures and information about the college and its programs. The student's reactions to group information sessions were mixed; he felt that some presenters covered the college's admissions process, financial aid opportunities, and the application essay adequately; others did not. The campus tour was also variously experienced; usually it included the library, student center, recreation facilities, classrooms and labs; in some cases the residence hall was not included. At eight of the colleges admissions personnel conducted individual interviews. Most colleges offered "viewbooks," but college catalogs generally had to be requested. Recommendations are offered to admissions officers concerning the admissions office itself, the group information session, the individual interview, the campus tour, and informational materials. Institutional researchers are urged to gather data on student and parent reactions to campus visits. (CH)

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IS THIS COLLEGE FOR ME? THE CAMPUS VISIT AS SEEN BY STUDENT AND PARENT

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Jean Endo
Editor
AIR Forum Publications

IS THIS COLLEGE FOR ME? THE CAMPUS VISIT AS SEEN BY STUDENT AND PARENT

Abstract

This research examines the pre-application campus visit from the perspective of a prospective student and his parents. Twenty seven (27) colleges and universities provided the database for this study. The institutions are located along the eastern seaboard from Maine to North Carolina; they include three public, six private religious, and eighteen private non-sectarian institutions.

The student and parents were engaged in the campus visits with the ultimate objective of selecting a college. Visits were conducted from June through August 1994; no more than two colleges were visited per day. The student was a rising senior at a private non-sectarian secondary school.

Following a profile of the colleges, the report addresses the following topics: (a) preparation for the visit, (b) arrival on campus, (c) the group information session, (d) the campus tour, (e) the interview, and (f) informational materials. Several operational suggestions are offered for conducting the campus visit. It is recommended that institutional researchers gather data about student and parent participation in, and their reactions to, the campus visit with the view of providing valuable guidance to college admissions offices.

Introduction

Successful recruitment of students is of obvious importance to a college or university. The campus visit is a significant component in a student recruitment plan. In many instances it may be the first personal experience of the student and/or parents with the college. Impressions as well as information gained during the visit are likely to influence the student's decision to apply for admission.

This research examines the pre-application campus visit from the perspective of the student and parent. This study was confined to those activities, contacts, and materials which were made available in preparation for or on the day of the campus visit. The research summarizes what occurred during the visits and how a student and his parents reacted to them.

Literature Review

During the 1980s, researchers developed various models of the college choice process. The type of model in which the topic of this study may be categorized is the multi-stage model. Based on an extensive review of the literature, Hossler, Braxton, and Coopersmith (1989, p. 248) set forth a three-stage model with these characteristics:

1. The formation of educational aspirations
2. The acquisition and examination of information about colleges to identify a limited set of institutions to which to apply

3. The evaluation of alternatives to make a final college choice.

The pre-application campus visit would fit into the second stage of the above model.

The literature on the campus visit is characterized by surveys of first-year students and admissions directors. The focus of these surveys was the formulation of advice for future college applicants and their high school counselors.

Surveys of first-year college students (Maguire, 1981; King, 1986) identify the campus visit as one of the important factors influencing their decision to matriculate. A strong correlation between campus visits by admitted applicants and the proportion of admitted applicants who matriculate there has been found (Yost & Tucker, 1995).

A survey of one hundred admissions directors produced extensive advice for prospective applicants (Utterback, 1984). The pre-application campus visit is cited as a major opportunity for learning about a specific institution.

Stanton (1987) provides suggestions for planning a campus visit. Meadows (1989) advises that, even though the college may offer a relatively informal information session, students should seek to make a favorable impression as well as learn about the institution. If extensive travel is required for a campus visit, the cost of transportation and lodging may be considerable (McDonough, 1994); therefore, the student and parents should work to maximize the benefits of the visit.

This sample of literature did not reveal a study such as the one conducted herein. An analysis of the campus visit to several institutions based on the observations of the same prospective student and parents should provide useful data to persons responsible for sponsoring the visits. This time the direction of advice is reversed, i.e., from the consumer to the provider.

Data Sources

Data were obtained during on-site visits to each of the selected colleges primarily from admissions office personnel and from faculty who participated in the campus visit activities. Observational data were also obtained during guided and unguided tours of the campuses.

The prospective student, whose perceptions are reported herein, was a white male, seventeen years of age. He was a rising senior in a non-sectarian, independent private school of approximately 1,000 students. His graduating class had 101 students, 96 of whom had accepted offers of college admission by their graduation date.

Methodology

The research was conducted through observational and interview techniques. The researcher was a participant observer in the campus visits and conducted the interview of the prospective student. During the campus visits, the researcher was known only as the parent of the prospective student. On most visits both parents accompanied the student.

The twenty-seven (27) institutions ranged from small liberal arts colleges to large universities. They are located along the eastern seaboard from Maine to North Carolina. The colleges were selected by the student. General limiting factors were that the college should be within a day's drive from home (500 miles maximum) and be recognized for its academic quality.

To assure a group information session and campus tour for the visit, calls were made to each admissions office. Visits occurred during the summer months of June, July, and August 1994. No more than two colleges were visited on the same day.

The prospective student, with his parents, prepared a list of questions to be pursued at each college. Immediately following each visit, the researcher prepared field notes on observations made. The formal interview of the prospective student was conducted upon conclusion of the entire set of visits. This interview was conducted over several sessions with the visit to each institution being reviewed individually.

Results

Because of the selected nature of the sample of institutions, a descriptive profile of the colleges was constructed to aid in interpreting the results. The campus visit was divided into the following phases for analysis: preparation for visit, arrival on campus, the group information session, the campus tour, the individual interview, and informational materials.

Profile of the Colleges

Rankings and characteristics of the colleges were reported in America's Best Colleges, 1994 College Guide, published by U.S. News & World Report. Their undergraduate enrollments ranged from 1,263 to 31,805. The mean enrollment was 5,201.7; the distribution was skewed with 18 of the 27 colleges having fewer than the mean. The median enrollment was 2,673; only three colleges exceeded 10,000 undergraduates.

Of the three public colleges, one was in a suburban and two were in urban settings. Six of the private colleges were identified as having religious affiliations; one was in a rural-small town, one in a suburban, two in urban, and two in major city settings. The remaining eighteen (18) were non-sectarian, private colleges. Six of these were in rural-small town settings, four were in suburban settings, seven were in urban settings, and one was in a major city.

In terms of rankings, twelve of the 27 colleges were categorized as "Best National Universities." Seven of these were listed in the Top 25, three were in Quartile 1, and two were in Quartile 2. The remaining fifteen colleges were cited as "Best National Liberal Arts Colleges." Nine were listed in the Top 25, and three were in each of Quartile 1 and Quartile 2. The mean SAT score was 1231; seven of the colleges had average SAT scores above 1300. Their mean acceptance rate was 42.3%; in seven colleges it was below 30%. The mean graduation rate was 87.1%; it exceeded 90% in twelve of the colleges.

Preparation for Visit

A telephone call was placed to each admissions office for information about tours and information sessions. Some colleges required specific appointments; others provided a standard schedule for drop-in visits. A campus map, parking information, and other general information were requested. In most instances this material was received prior to the visit. When appointments were scheduled, the college sent a letter confirming the time and place. Some trips required overnight accommodations and coordination of schedules between two or more colleges.

For the student, the campus visit was his first visit to 22 of the 27 colleges. Four had been visited as part of family vacations as tourists. As an elementary school student, the student had attended a summer enrichment course at one of the colleges. One or both parents had previously visited six of the colleges either as tourists or to attend professional meetings. Therefore, the campus visits reported herein were overwhelmingly the first visit to the college by the student and parents.

Arrival on Campus

Campus maps and/or signs were adequate in locating the admissions office. At twelve of the colleges, parking lots or marked spaces were adjacent to the building which housed the admissions office. At ten other colleges parking was available in general parking lots; at one college the lot was rather remote from the admissions office. Street parking was required at the remaining five colleges; in three instances there was a charge

for street parking. At seven colleges a pass was required for parking on campus. These passes were generally sent in advance of the visit but occasionally needed to be acquired on campus. In the latter case, a somewhat inconvenient return trip to the car was necessary to place the pass behind the windshield. One college levied a charge to use their parking lot.

At eleven colleges the admission office was in a building originally built as a house. These were usually large houses which had been remodeled on the first floor to provide a waiting area, offices, interview rooms, and/or a room for group sessions. At a majority (16) of the colleges, the admissions office was in an administration building with other offices. Living room furniture was found in the waiting areas of the houses; in other buildings the furniture was more likely to be standard office waiting room furniture. The decor in houses was more homey; but student and parents were more sensitive to small, cramped, hot conditions without regard to the type of structure.

Admissions offices generally had supplies of informational brochures about the college and individual programs. One interesting feature was a computer printout of alumni/ae by geographical location. A few offices had personal computers for the prospective student to use in learning about the college via a menu of information categories. Copies of student newspapers, college yearbooks, news clippings about the college, and books by the faculty were occasionally available for reviewing.

Refreshments (coffee, lemonade, cookies) were provided at five colleges. Others occasionally had vending machines located in or near the waiting area. Two colleges provided the opportunity for complimentary lunches. We lunched at six of the colleges; five in student centers and one at an outdoor buffet.

Group Information Session

At eighteen colleges the group session or interview preceded the tour. (Seven of the colleges conducted interviews rather than providing group sessions; one college conducted both an interview and group session.) The schedule at a few colleges allowed the visitor to select whether the tour would be taken before or after the group session. Typically, the tour immediately followed the group session.

The principal presenter was always a member of the admissions office. On two occasions another administrator or a faculty member was present. At one college, three persons, two administrators and a student, gave the presentation. The student later led the campus tour. Presenters were dressed professionally in accord with summer; one wore a hat which somewhat distracted from the presentation.

Eighteen presenters were Caucasian (6 men, 12 women); ten were Black (6 men, 4 women); and one was Asian (woman). The presenters represented greater diversity than did the student bodies of the colleges. Some presenters introduced themselves as graduates of the college.

The group session was conducted in a variety of settings. Some were conducted in the waiting area/lounge; some were held in larger rooms in the admissions office suite. Other sites included regular classrooms, lecture halls, a chapel, small auditorium, and theater settings. These sites were usually in buildings other than where the admissions office was housed.

At six of the colleges, the prospective students were asked to introduce themselves during the group session. At one college the introduction was by home town only. Rarely were prospective students present without one or both parents in attendance. Name tags were not used at any college--even by the presenters. Although parents often asked questions of the presenters, no information about parents was solicited. (No one asked my profession and, therefore, did not know that I was a college professor.)

The content of the typical group session was the college's admissions process, financial aid opportunities, and the application essay. Other topics included campus life, dormitories, sports, and the community environment. A video of the college and its surrounding community was shown at one college. Examples were given about how an application is reviewed and what features would enhance the applicant's admission. One presenter began with no formal presentation; the audience was invited to raise questions and, thus, set the direction of the group session. (After three or four group sessions, the presentation on financial aid sounded very

familiar. The central clearinghouse method of forms for financial aid has introduced considerable standardization into the description of financial aid procedures.)

The prospective student gave these observations about the group sessions and presenters:

1. Negative. Presenter was unsure of facts and figures; did not know the demographics of the student body; did not appear as informed as the student guide; was not familiar with the institution's policy on Advanced Placement credits; gave facts too fast; promoted the institution too much; paused too much; talked more about the admissions process than the college itself. Questions asked by parents were too specific; they should have been raised individually.

2. Positive. Presenter was factual and straightforward; explained factors pertaining to out-of-state applicants; emphasized good aspects of the setting; gave a polished presentation; seemed to know the subject; was composed and relaxed; gave quick response to questions.

Campus Tour

Whether the tour preceded or followed the group session seemed not to make a difference to the student; he did, however, favor the tour prior to an interview. In either case, tours and group sessions or interviews were sometimes too tightly scheduled back-to-back. The tours on two campuses were independent of the group information session. They were conducted for visitors on a regular schedule regardless of their reason for desiring a tour.

Tour leaders were always students. Twenty three were Caucasian (9 men, 14 women); two were Asian (2 Women). At one college, the tour was led by two guides, one man and one woman. The guides were generally dressed informally, sometimes very casually (noted by parent if not by prospective student!). A few guides wore identifying shirts with the name or logo of the college. In general, they did not wear any identifying attire or name tags. At least no one was remembered to wear a shirt with the name or logo of a college other than their own!

Tour groups ranged in size from one family to 25 or more persons. Large groups tended to move slowly and presented a hearing problem. No tour leader used a bullhorn. An important skill of the tour leader was to be able to walk backward while speaking to the group. This action was sometimes a distraction because of concern that the tour leader would fall. In large groups, when the tour leader chatted with two or three persons extensively at the head of the group, we were left not knowing what information we might be missing. An appreciated practice was the guide's expression of willingness to remain after the tour to answer individual questions.

Extended presentations tended to be made with the group stopped either outdoors or while seated in a classroom. When talking outdoors, the leader sometimes had the group standing in the hot sun (even when shade trees were close) and facing into the sun. On rainy days, the colleges were prepared to lend umbrellas for the tour.

Leaders occasionally failed to be sensitive to nearby noise distractions--street traffic, construction equipment, airplanes overhead. Tour leaders sometimes needlessly repeated information presented in the group session--and sometimes contradicted it! As students, they were generally perceived to be more candid and authentic, if not more accurate, than were the group session presenters. Their sharing of experiences about their own college life added a personal touch. When the tour and group session leaders appeared to give coordinated presentations, the time seemed more productive.

Because visits were made in the summer months, many campuses were deserted or nearly so. More evident were construction and maintenance personnel. The tours provided a good opportunity to check the cleanliness of the campus, the condition of buildings, the campus setting in relation to the surrounding community, and nearby street congestion. Dirt, unkept grounds, scratches on doors and woodwork, torn carpets, and scaling paint were obvious detractors.

Sites on the tour usually included the library, student center, athletic/recreation facilities, a computer lab, a language lab, a science lab, and a regular classroom. Somewhat frustrating was the occasion of the tour leader finding a building unexpectedly locked.

Of special interest was the visit to a residence hall. Eight of the colleges did not permit entering a residence hall; one allowed entering only a lounge in a hall. Four colleges had

sample dormitory rooms outfitted for inspection; four others allowed entrance to occupied rooms. At ten colleges, vacant rooms were open for visiting. In addition to seeing a room, it was helpful to visit student lounge and dining areas. Although providing an assurance of safety, security measures at one college created a prison-like image.

Tour leaders sometimes spoke or walked too rapidly. A few tours seemed too long; they typically lasted 45 minutes to an hour. Because groups were usually smaller than in the group session, the tour provided more opportunity for asking questions.

At the close of the tour, one college offered free ice cream. Another college provided a stop at a famous campus ice cream shop--but no free ice cream!

Individual Interview

Eight of the 27 colleges provided individual interviews for the student with admissions personnel rather than a group session. One college conducted a small group interview; one had both an individual interview and a group session. At two colleges, the parents were invited to join the admissions person and the student at the close of the individual interview. (At group information sessions, both parents and students were present.)

The student reported that some interviews were very controlled and were like responding to essay questions. Other interviews were more open to questions from the student. In one instance, the interviewer asked for questions but was seen to be

watching the clock! At three colleges the interviewers admitted to being new on the job and not able to respond to some of the student's questions.

Some interviewers asked a lot of questions; some were seen to promote their college too much. The student preferred interviewers who were informal and friendly. We estimate that most interviews were around 30-45 minutes in length.

Informational Materials

Viewbooks were provided by 24 of the 27 colleges. Sixteen colleges sent viewbooks prior to the campus visit; five of these were found to be brief versions of more complete viewbooks which were provided during the visit. In all, twelve colleges provided viewbooks during the campus visit. One college sent a viewbook after the campus visit; three colleges did not provide a viewbook at any time.

Viewbooks contained color pictures of students, the campus, classrooms, and faculty. The viewbooks were attractive and designed to catch one's attention. They often included facts about the institution, the admissions process, costs, and financial aid. Campus life was often highlighted in pictures and text. Academic programs were presented in rather general terms.

College catalogs were generally less available without a specific request. At seventeen colleges the catalog was obtained on site. One college sent a catalog before the visit, and one sent their catalog after the visit. Catalogs were not available in eight of the admissions offices. In two instances we were

informed that they could be purchased at the college bookstore. Five colleges charged for their catalogs; prices ranged from $3 to $5. A mailing fee of $2 was cited by one college if a catalog were sent through the mail.

Catalogs contained few pictures but many details about programs and courses, lists of faculty, and college regulations. Missing, but critical in regard to advanced courses, was information about the frequency of course offerings. In addition to or in place of college catalogs, some institutions, provided brochures about specific majors or areas of study.

Suggestions for Admissions Officers

The campus visit is likely to be the prospective student's and parents' first face-to-face experience with the college. First impressions are often long remembered but their impact on the choice of a college is less clear. The visits described herein were clearly influential in narrowing the list for further consideration. The student ultimately applied to six colleges and was offered letters of acceptance by five. An additional visit for accepted students was made to three colleges. Although not described in this paper, the second visit played a very major role in the student's decision.

In regard to the pre-application campus visit, the following suggestions are offered:

1. The admissions office. Clear directions and signs are helpful for locating the office; a campus map should be provided

in advance of the visit. Adjacent parking space is desirable. Free parking is much appreciated. The waiting area should have comfortable furniture and pleasing decor. The availability of refreshments is nice but not essential. A supply of informational material for perusal is helpful (see also item 5 below).

2. Group information session. A well-prepared presentation sets a positive tone for the visit. A preview of the topics to be covered is helpful. Give attention to the pacing of the presentation and transition between topics. The speaker should be enthusiastic about the college but should avoid over-sell. In addition to effective speaking skills, the presenter should be knowledgeable about the college. A video about the college may be a useful supplement to the presentation. Limit the session to an hour with 15-20 minutes for questions. Skill is needed in sorting the questions of general interest for response from those to defer for follow-up with the individual questioner.

3. Individual interview. The student preferred broad questions and an informal format to specific questions and a standardized format. The interviewer should avoid making a presentation but should allow time for the student to ask questions. The interviewer should be well informed about the college, its individual programs, and policies such as those pertaining to credit for advanced placement. Limit the interview from 45 minutes to an hour. Invite the parents to join the

interviewer and student during the closing phase of the interview.

4. Campus tour. At colleges where information sessions are provided, the tour guide should be present at the session or very knowledgeable about its contents. Seniors were the best guides in that they were very familiar with the institution and had many interesting personal experiences to share. The one-family tour was preferred; at least, keep groups small to facilitate hearing. The pace of the tour--not too slow, not too fast--should be considered. A one-hour limit should be observed; the guide should remain after the tour for individual questions. Plan the itinerary to avoid construction and maintenance work; be sensitive to the aesthetics of sites along the route. Visit classrooms in one or more buildings, a residence hall (a student's room), a dining area, and student center. Include any unique features of the campus on the tour. Buildings to be visited should be kept open and set up as they would be used.

5. Informational materials. When possible, provide the viewbook to the student and parents before their arrival for the campus visit. Make college catalogs and brochures on specific majors and areas of study available during the visit. An added plus would be the opportunity to talk with someone (faculty or advisor) in the department of the student's interest.

Implications for Institutional Researchers

Institutional researchers should gather data about student and parent participation in campus visits and their reactions to the visits. Soliciting perceptions from students who do not apply as well as those who do may prove useful in evaluating the campus visit program. Of the 27 colleges visited, none requested an evaluation of the campus visit on site or through a subsequent follow-up inquiry. This circumstance partly motivated the preparation of this unsolicited evaluation.

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